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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a clear trend toward the decentralization of education has emerged in both developing and more developed countries. This paper examines issues in decentralization and identifies common factors for the transfer of power within the educational system. The paper identifies advantages and disadvantages of decentralization, identifies prerequisites of effective decentralization, presents guidelines for planning a scheme of delegation, and offers suggestions for developing a policy framework. Ways to formulate clear policy guidelines are illustrated through the use of the following examples: designating responsibility for school-level policymaking. establishing national standards, and creating local financial management. Decentralization is most easily seen at individual school levels in which clear policy statements, improved school management, and a well-defined local delegation of powers operate within a prescribed framework. (LMI)

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Decentralising the Education System

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DECENTRALISING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Decentralising the Education System

A Discussion Paper

1. Introduction

1.1 In recent years a clear trend towards the decentralisation of control over the education service has emerged. This trend is evident both in developing countries and in countries where mass education has been firmly established for a considerable period.

1.2 Decentralisation can take a number of forms. It may involve only moving the administrative apparatus of a centralised state system out from headquarters to local areas. At the other extreme it may imply transferring substantial powers away from the state itself towards local government, school proprietors or even the schools themselves. It may be seen also within the individual institution.

1.3 These various kinds of organisational change have in common that decision-making is moved out from central authority. People nearer the classroom are empowered. Greater variation in policy and practice becomes possible. The system can become more responsive. It is also more open to some forms of abuse. All forms of decentralisation thus involve shifts in the distribution of powers and functions among the various sources of authority within the system.

2. Sources of Authority

2.1 In most countries control of the education service is, at least to some extent, shared among a number of different types of authority. Almost invariably, power ultimately lies with central government, in that by legislation it has the capacity to withdraw authority from other partners. (Exceptions exist in the case of some federal states where entrenched laws protect the rights of states or provinces.) In other cases, even where significant authority is given to bodies such as local authorities, the powers of these bodies derive from central government and could be revised or revoked by central government.

2.2 In most cases, therefore, the most important single organisation concerned with the management of education will be the government ministry. The role of such ministries varies widely. In some cases it is largely confined to such activities as setting educational standards and monitoring performance. In others it extends to direct management of schools and other establishments.

2.3 Most countries also give important powers to a number of non-governmental organisations which, nevertheless, base their authority upon statute. Bodies concerned with the registration, discipline or employment of the teaching profession often fall into this category whether in the shape of relatively remote professional bodies such as the General Teaching Council of Scotland or in the much more significant cases of the Teaching Service Commissions of a large number of African countries.

2.4 In most countries there is also a substantial body of private schools which are not owned by the government or by any local authority but by independent bodies. In African countries many of these schools are run by churches or missions. Although the government

usually obliges such schools to meet certain standards, the proprietors retain important managerial powers. The extent of these powers varies from country to country.

2.5 In all countries the individual school also has a degree of independence. The headteacher is able to take some management decisions, the extent of which varies considerably from system to system. Thus, where there are separate school managers, the headteacher's powers may be limited to a small range of professional matters. In other cases the individual school may enjoy a large measure of autonomy, limited only by very generalised government regulation.

2.6 Within the school, management structures may range from the very rudimentary to the highly sophisticated. In some schools separate departments enjoy a degree of autonomy and are, therefore, in a position to make policy decisions which will significantly affect the educational experience of young people although only in relation to a single subject or course.

2.7 The existence of these - and other - sources of authority within the education system has important implications for the manner in which the concept of decentralisation may be applied. In some contexts the focus may be on transferring a range of powers concerning several public services to a regional or local tier of government. In other cases, the interest will be in developing a district level of management of the ministry itself. In some countries such as Great Britain one trend is to transfer power away from the middle tier of local authorities towards central government on the one hand and individual schools on the other. Within schools there may be a desire either to emphasise the need to develop 'whole school' policies or alternatively to foster the autonomy of individual departments.

2.8 The concept of decentralisation may, therefore, imply a transfer of powers in any one of a wide range of ways among the complex of legitimate sources of authority within the education system. This paper seeks to identify a number of the common factors which would apply in most of these circumstances.

3. Advantages of Decentralisation

3.1 Present trends in the management of education take place against a background in which confidence in central planning has greatly diminished. The collapse of the communist regimes of eastern Europe and the very evident internal stresses being experienced in the Soviet Union are considered by many people to have demonstrated the inefficiency of large scale state planning even in countries with, by world standards, relatively developed industrial economies. For the purposes of this paper it does not matter whether these perceptions are correct: it is sufficient that they are widely held and help to create a climate of opinion in which decentralisation is likely to be seen as desirable.

3.2 A second fundamental change also contributes to this climate of opinion. The growth of new technology has made it more possible than ever before to take key decisions at relatively local levels. Information can be made more readily available throughout the system than in the past. It becomes ever easier to reconcile genuine local autonomy with strategic control at a central level.

3.3 Within this broader context in which a climate generally favourable to decentralised systems of management and control prevails, a number of potential advantages relevant to the needs of the education service can be perceived.

(a) Local control evidently encourages responsiveness to local needs. Even in quite small countries, conditions are not as homogeneous as a highly centralised system requires. Empowering local communities or district authorities can often result in decisions being made on the basis of greater knowledge and in a way which is likely to yield more appropriate results.

(b) Even at the level of the individual school or college, differences of geography, resources, tradition and personal preference imply a need for some kinds of significant decision to be within the powers of local management. Indeed, it can be argued that variety among institutions is in itself a virtue, allowing choice, encouraging experiment and permitting the relative effectiveness of different approaches to be assessed.

(c) Decentralisation can speed up the decision making process. If minor issues have to be referred to some remote central authority, rapid response is out of the question. Furthermore, the ability of the centre to deal with its legitimate strategic concerns is impaired. Ministry headquarters becomes paralysed by the need to reach decisions on a limitless number of minor matters which, by their nature, will be imperfectly understood in an office remote from the particular district or school.

(d) Decentralisation, therefore, encourages the development of a clear distinction between strategic control which is the proper function of the centre and operational management which is more efficiently carried out locally. This distinction in turn helps to create an organisational structure which is both effective and responsive. It should be noticed, however, that the separation of strategy and operational control may in practice be difficult to achieve.

(e) A serious problem in highly centralised systems is one of scale. The sheer number of individual schools or the size of the area mean that the issues are frequently beyond the comprehension of even perfectly capable administrators. Transferring powers to local level means that managers are dealing with issues which are much more readily understood.

(f) Decentralisation encourages initiative and improves the quality of management, particularly at local level. In a highly centralised system key figures such as district officers or headteachers are denied decision making opportunities and frequently have little, if any, management training. Their quality of management is, therefore, not surprisingly, often poor.

(g) Decentralisation releases human potential. People respond to increased opportunities to use their talents and energies productively.

(h) Greater involvement in the decision making process improves morale leading to enhanced job satisfaction and better motivation.

(i) A well designed system of decentralised management increases accountability. Clarifying the respective roles of central government, local government, school management and other agencies makes it possible to set appropriate targets for each.

4. Problems of decentralisation

4.1 Highly centralised systems did not emerge by accident. They reflect several very legitimate concerns. Governments wish to ensure that the education system will respond to national priorities. They want to promote equality rather than allow richer areas to progress

while others are denied opportunities. It is important to regulate standards. Perhaps most important of all, at least in the context of Africa, it was seen as essential to expand the system and extend opportunities as widely as possible within a very short space of time. The formidable increase in pupil numbers in a short span of years is a tribute to the success of the approaches adopted. The present focus on less centralised structures may perhaps reflect a stage at which emphasis on issues of quality rather than numbers has become appropriate.

4.2 If increased delegation is to work successfully there are a number of potential problems which must first be addressed :-

(a) Greater local autonomy implies greater variety. As noted above, variety can in itself be a considerable virtue. It can also, however, be a reflection of different standards of provision and spasmodic attention to national policies. If these problems are to be avoided it will be necessary to clarify in considerable detail what are the standards expected. A well-defined policy framework is thus an indispensable element of a decentralised system. (This issue is dealt with in greater detail in sections 8 and 9.)

(b) Any system of educational management depends on effective monitoring. Even in the most highly centralised system, the centre needs to know what is taking place in each of thousands of individual schools. When those schools are permitted greater freedom of action the need for information increases. Furthermore monitoring requires to become more sophisticated as the extent of local differences increases.

(c) At first glance it seems much more difficult to ensure fairness in a decentralised structure. In particular, the equitable distribution of resources presents apparently greater problems. In practice, decentralising can help to clarify the issues and lead to more effective solutions. For example, there is no reason why the government should not define particular areas as being 'areas of need' in which a higher capitation allowance is paid. The process of creating a more devolved structure makes resourcing issues more explicit and allows government to reach rational conclusions about matters which may currently be taken for granted.

(d) Any attempt to spread decision making powers more widely throughout the system inevitably implies a need for increased training. It may also impose demands for new equipment, particularly computers. However, it is important to recognise from the outset that the costs in terms of developing human expertise will be much greater than any material costs and require to be addressed more urgently.

(e) Effective decentralisation depends upon clear demarcation of the functions and powers of the different tiers of management. It should not imply duplication of effort. Nevertheless, it will almost certainly require increases in staff and equipment. Decentralisation will not prove a cheaper form of management: its justification must be that it is better.

5. Prerequisites of effective decentralisation

5.1 Decentralisation has a variety of potential meanings. It can refer to the process of delegating central government functions to local government or to regional or district structures within government departments. It can refer to the empowerment of individual schools and colleges. Within establishments, it can mean giving greater autonomy to departments and individuals. It can indeed be a process applying at all of these levels simultaneously.

5.2 Clearly the means by which decentralised authority is made to work effectively also differ depending on the type of structural change which is being contemplated. However, there are three key elements which are likely to play a significant role in any programme of decentralisation and which can be seen as prerequisites of success:-

(a) A decentralised system is likely to be ineffective unless there is some structure of public authority at a local level. The authority may be a local arm of central government or a form of local government. It may operate at a regional or district level. Whatever form it takes, there will be a need for officers of reasonable seniority able to exercise initiative and take decisions, They will need to be properly trained and must be supported by an adequate administrative structure. They should have the means of knowing what is happening in the schools in their areas and should have the authority to require compliance with national policies and reasonable standards of provision.

(b) Monitoring and evaluation will depend on the existence of a field inspectorate, sufficient in numbers, training, confidence and skills for their task. In small systems the local officers and the inspectors may be the same people. In larger systems the inspectorate will be the eyes and ears of senior officers at regional or district level.

(c) The key to successful delegation must be the creation of an effective management structure at the level of the individual school. Such a management structure can evidently take many forms. It may encompass a role for parental and community representatives on management committees as in several African countries or on boards of governors as in England. It can take account of the interests of school proprietors such as churches. In all cases an indispensable element is effective day-to-day professional management through the headteacher with, in larger schools, support from other promoted staff. It is for this reason that training - especially management training - for headteachers and aspiring headteachers is central to any programme of decentralisation.

5.3 Successful decentralisation also requires that appropriate mechanisms exist for sharing functions and powers among the various levels of the structure or among the partners contributing to the running of the system. Two of these - a scheme of delegation and a well-defined policy framework - may prove particularly helpful in clarifying the process of decentralisation and establishing a structure which functions efficiently.

6. Scheme of Delegation

6.1 Effective decentralisation within the structure of an organisation (whether it be a ministry of education, a local authority or any other body) is assisted by a clear mapping out of the channels along which decisions are referred and the powers which are held at various levels.

6.2 One way in which this exercise can be carried out is through the drawing up of a formal scheme of delegation. Such a scheme would begin from a statement of the powers of the organisation itself. In the case of a public body this would probably be contained in legislation. Thus, for example, the ministry of education may have the power (and duty) to maintain a register of recognised primary and secondary schools. The law may also say that the ministry has the right to inspect schools to ensure that standards are being met and that it has the power to lay down what will constitute acceptable standards.

6.3 Who within the ministry has the duty of maintaining the register? At what level is a decision made to add a school or to remove a school's registration? What is the mechanism for carrying out inspections? Who draws up the annual programme? Are the standards contained in regulations approved by the minister or are they drawn up administratively? What are the consequences of withdrawal from the register?

6.4 The answers to such questions would provide the basis of a section of a scheme of delegation.

7. Drawing up a Scheme of Delegation

7.1 Drawing up a scheme of delegation is largely a process of clarifying existing procedures with a view to either building them into the scheme or modifying them as necessary. It is important that this should be done in such a way as to assist people to do their jobs or find out where a particular decision might be obtained, without inhibiting future change or imposing unnecessary bureaucracy. A scheme should, therefore, be detailed enough to provide guidance but not so detailed as to become rigid and unhelpful. It is important that the process for modifying the scheme should be straightforward enough that changing it is not seen as a formidable obstacle in the road of progress.

7.2 In relation to each area of activity, the following preparatory steps may be helpful :-

(a) Establish that the activity does lie within the authority of the ministry (or the TSC or the local authority, depending upon which body is drawing up the scheme).

(b) Identify what powers the body has. (For example, the TSC may be able to determine the method of appointing teachers but have no control over the level at which staffing standards are set.)

(c) Devise a flow diagram setting out the stages by which the general power is translated into a decision in the field. (Thus the ministry may have both the powers and the budget to carry out essential building repairs. What are the stages to be gone through in order to reach a decision to undertake a particular repair on an identified building?)

(d) Review the diagram in order to eliminate cases of duplication of effort or confused lines of management.

(e) Identify a particular level in the structure at which each stage identified in the flowchart can appropriately be carried out and try to ensure that decisions are being taken as close to the point of implementation as is reasonably practicable. (Thus it will probably be necessary to take decisions about major new building projects at a very senior level so that priorities can be established within a limited capital programme. There is no such necessity in relation to routine repairs.)

(f) At this stage in the process, it will probably be necessary to determine thresholds for identifying decisions of similar types but differing importance. (Thus, in the case of the building repairs, the threshold could be financial. Expenditure up to a certain level might be authorised locally with larger spending decisions requiring to be referred to a higher level. By

contrast, in relation to curriculum matters, the threshold would be more likely to refer to the type of decision. Thus, it might be decided that a district authority could add to but not subtract from the compulsory elements in the national curriculum.)

(g) Ensure that the emerging scheme of delegation allows for unforeseen difficulties and adverse circumstances. (What happens if the local community thinks more extensive repairs are needed? Is the officer who took the original decision the final source of authority? Has allowance been made for any process of reviewing controversial decisions?)

(h) Review the job descriptions of the staff involved at the various stages to ensure that the scope of activities and responsibilities implicit in the scheme is allowed for.

(i) If necessary, review staffing levels or gradings to reflect new responsibilities. This should be as likely to imply a decrease as an increase in staff. If the introduction of a scheme of delegation is accompanied by a process of decentralisation, the net effect should be a transfer of responsibilities and, therefore, staff - including decision makers - from the centre to the field.

(j) The scheme should indicate clearly the steps that must be taken in order to bring about changes in its operation. These should be simple but are likely to require clearance at a fairly senior level.

(k) Incorporate the scheme into a convenient handbook which is clear and readily accessible.

(l) Each stage should be undertaken in a consultative manner, giving both staff and users of the service the opportunity to comment and make suggestions.

8. Policy Framework

8.1 A scheme of delegation can provide only an administrative skeleton. Successful decentralisation of control demands not only a management structure that is clear but also a well defined concept of what the education system is seeking to achieve. If government policies are to be carried into effect by a large number of local managers of various types, they must first be clearly formulated and effectively communicated. The counterpart of a satisfactory scheme of delegation is, therefore, a well-conceived policy framework.

8.2 Such a policy framework would need to cover all those areas of policy where government wished to ensure compliance with nationally-established norms. Obvious examples would include national staffing standards, a national curriculum and so forth.

8.3 There can, of course, be considerable scope for debate over what might comprise a satisfactory national policy framework in any of these areas. In one country it might be felt necessary to determine centrally all the main components of the curriculum at each stage and stipulate the amount of the week which must be devoted to each subject. In other cases it may be thought enough to prescribe a limited range of core subjects and leave proprietors and schools a considerable degree of latitude in fixing the detailed curriculum. In either case it is essential that the extent of national prescription is clearly stated and the area of local discretion is not left in doubt.

9. Formulating clear policy guidelines

9.1 Developing the type of policy framework which will assist the process of decentralisation is clearly not a finite 'one-off' activity such as drawing up a scheme of delegation. Educational policies need to be considered on their merits rather than solely on the basis of whether they fit a particular administrative framework. Furthermore, the development of major policies takes time and existing policies could not be systematically reviewed except over a fairly generous timescale.

9.2 Nevertheless, if it is intended to introduce greater delegation of authority, it is important that that concept be built into the process of policy making and review. There is no point in having a declared intention of delegating if the policy statements being issued start from the assumption that all important decisions will originate from the ministry building.

9.3 It is possibly reasonable to start from an assumption that power will be decentralised and then consider what exceptions have to be made. In other words, adopt an approach to policy making which puts the onus of proof on those who want to draw a decision into the centre. A few examples may be helpful.

9.4 *Example 1 : School level policy making*

9.4.1 In a large secondary school the headteacher has decided to review current methods of ordering materials. The present practice is that he does all the ordering. Anybody who thinks they need new books, for example, must see the headteacher and hope that his/her request can be accommodated. The school does, however, have a management structure with several senior staff being designated as heads of subject departments.

9.4.2 After discussion it is decided that an annual supplies budget needs to be drawn up and planned. Part of it needs to be held centrally for the purchase of materials required by the school as a whole or for bigger purchases. Part can be devolved to the heads of department.

9.4.3 Operation of this new procedure will require a number of new decisions such as :-

(i) How and by whom is the allocation of the budget into centrally-held and devolved sums to be made?

(ii) What is to be the basis of dividing the devolved budget among the department heads? Is it to be determined on the basis of 'gut feeling' by the headteacher? Is there to be some kind of formula based on, for example, pupil uptake of the subject?

(iii) Are departments responsible for all teaching materials or only books?

(iv) Is there to be a financial limit on the cost of any single item which departmental heads can order?

9.4.4 These questions are, of course, only illustrative. Many more could be posed. What is important is that, at the end of the process, the school has in effect drawn up a policy on ordering supplies and it has been drawn up in such a way as to incorporate a decentralist

approach to school management. It is worth noticing that the process could have faced the headteacher with a need to make other decisions. Suppose for example that the head had embarked on the task because of a growing awareness of his inability to make appropriate purchases for curricular areas of which he had little knowledge. If his management structure had been limited to a single deputy head, he might have concluded that it was impossible to think about the supplies question until after he had reviewed the overall management arrangements so as to create some structure which would allow departmental concerns to be addressed.

9.5 *Example 2 : National Staffing Standards*

9.5.1 The government considers it necessary to draw up new national staffing standards which can operate successfully in a more decentralised system of educational management. Currently it determines the staffing complement of each individual school and directly supervises the appointment of individual teachers.

9.5.2 The government must decide what elements of the staffing exercise it sees as being legitimate areas of national concern. On the one hand it will probably recognise that the appointments system will be more efficiently administered from a local level. It will also probably agree that decisions about the exact pattern of staffing in the school and the choice of individual teachers can more appropriately be made locally, perhaps by the school itself. On the other hand it will almost certainly wish to retain centrally some measure of control over expenditure levels and entry qualifications.

9.5.3 These considerations will give rise to a series of questions which must be resolved. The following list merely illustrates the kind of issues involved.

(i) Is a minimum standard of qualification to be laid down? Does this imply a national register of teachers to which local decision makers have access?

(ii) Should staff numbers be determined solely by pupil numbers? Should other factors such as curricular balance be taken into account?

(iii) Will the district or school be allowed any virement? Is it possible to have more or less teachers than the norm in order to reflect local priorities?

(iv) Should the staffing standards also incorporate a management structure, i.e. a particular complement of deputy heads and heads of department in relation to the size of the school? Will any variation be allowed to reflect local needs?

(v) Should individual appointments be made by the school itself? Who would be involved in the appointments procedures? Is it necessary to prescribe particular procedures to be followed (for example open advertisement and interview)? What checks can be implemented to minimise the risk of corruption?

9.5.4 The government could, of course, arrive at a wide range of answers to these questions. It should, however, have developed an approach which incorporates a clearly thought out

definition of the appropriate powers and responsibilities of the different levels of management involved. It will have to consider whether all of the people involved have been given a clear understanding of their respective roles and have the expertise and training which are necessary to discharge them

9.6 *Example 3 : Local financial management*

9.6.1 Ultimately any system of delegation is likely to involve some decentralisation of decisions concerning money. Indeed, any restructuring which stops short of devolving some measure of financial control will be restricted to administrative decentralisation. The element of empowering local people will be minimised.

9.6.2 If the government is contemplating some measure of local financial management a very wide range of issues will need to be addressed, including the following :-

(i) To which level or levels is control to be devolved? Will individual districts and/or schools have their own budgets?

(ii) What areas of budgetary control are to be devolved? For example, districts could be given control over repairs and maintenance but not over new building. Schools might control the supply of teaching materials but not classroom equipment over a certain value.

(iii) How are minimum standards to be prescribed and what levels of discretion will be permitted? For example, in relation to teacher staffing it might be laid down that for a school of a certain size finance will be provided to allow the employment of ten teachers. The school or district might have discretion to vary the actual complement in response to local needs and priorities but subject to a prescribed minimum and maximum.

(iv) On what basis are local budgets to be assessed? What account is to be taken of factors such as numbers of pupils, numbers of schools, travel difficulties etc?

(v) What arrangements can be made for auditing?

9.6.3 The process of decentralising financial control is essentially one of making explicit many decisions which are currently taken without any clearly conceived policy framework. For example, consideration of how budgets might be given to individual schools inevitably raises such questions as whether it should be made possible for each existing school to be run viably or whether pressure should be exerted to bring about mergers where two non-cost-effective schools are operating in the same neighbourhood.

9.6.4 Inevitably it will be discovered that much more is being spent on educating a single child in some areas than in others. Often this will not be the product of conscious decision but the by-product of other decisions which have never been questioned. For example, costs will be higher in a school which has been allowed or encouraged to increase the number of subjects in its curriculum. Is this a fair reflection of national priorities or something which needs to be brought under control?

9.6.5 Delegating financial responsibilities can bring significant advantages. Local administrators or school headteachers seldom feel any incentive to achieve economies if there is no benefit to their districts or schools. If, however, they can redeploy money to matters of greater priority, ways of achieving improvements in the management of resources are usually found. Local managers are faced with the financial consequences of their decisions, thus encouraging a greater sense of realism and responsibility.

9.6.6 The process of deciding the basis of decentralisation has the same effect so far as the central authority is concerned. It is faced with the need to understand and justify the basis on which money is spent. Policy tends to be subjected to an increasing close and searching scrutiny. At all levels of the system accountability is greatly increased. A new and productive kind of relationship begins to emerge between those who finance and use the system and those who provide it.

10. A new kind of relationship

10.1 Thorough implementation of a programme of decentralisation essentially involves the development of a new type of relationship between the centre and the other elements in the system. Whatever the variety of decentralisation which is being introduced, a kind of contractual relationship begins to evolve and should perhaps be made explicit.

10.2 This trend is most easily seen at the level of the individual school. Clear policy statements, improved school management and a well defined delegation of powers to local level allow the school greater discretion but within a prescribed framework. Government is entitled to expect a certain type of service to be delivered (e.g. a prescribed curriculum to be made available, specified groups of pupils to be admitted or approved teaching methodologies to be employed) and required minimum standards to be met. To enable these targets to be fulfilled public support is likely to be made available in the form of funds, staff, training, teaching materials, equipment or premises. Failure to provide the stipulated service could result in the application of sanctions which might ultimately include withdrawal of recognition or discontinuation of grant.

10.3 A position thus develops in which the public authority specifies a service, provides support and monitors performance while the individual establishment provides the service within a stated framework. The same type of relationship can be seen with somewhat less clarity in the relations between other sources of authority in the system. Thus the government may, in effect, contract with churches and others as major providers of education. It may fund local government to be the provider of education of a stated type and quality.

10.4 The key to success lies in clarity of purpose and function. A system does not require to be run from the centre in order to develop clear aims and effective means of putting them into practice. What is needed is a common sense of mission, clear policies effectively communicated and logical demarcation of powers and functions at all levels. If these requirements are met, delegation allows the release of initiative and energy in the service of shared objectives.

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